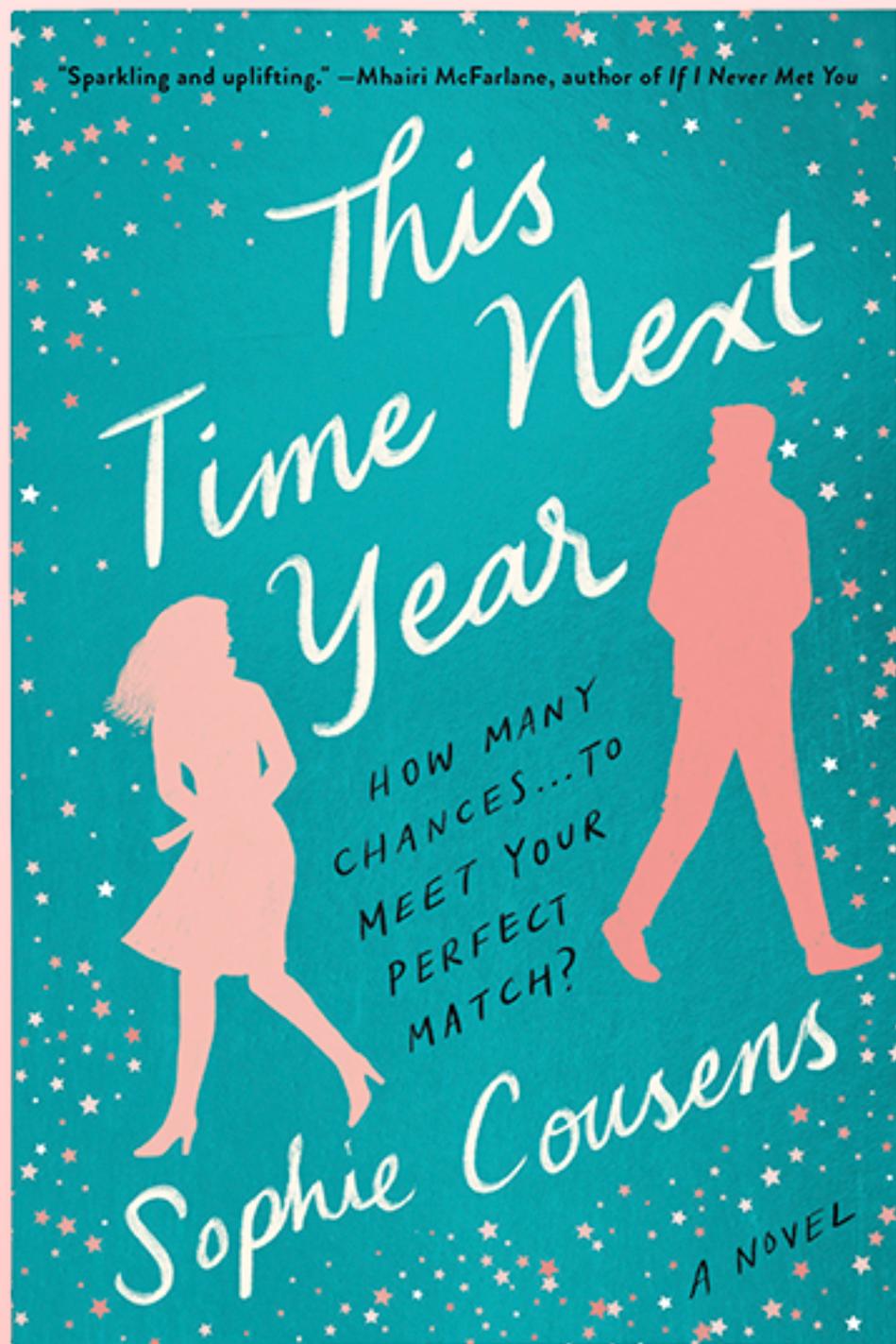


Book
Club
Kit



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Discussion Questions

1.

The novel begins on New Year's Eve, and also follows Minnie and Quinn throughout the years on that particular day. What implications does New Year's have for the two of them? On what occasions have their paths almost crossed, and what did you make of their first meeting in the present of the story?

2.

Though they are born on the same day within minutes of each other, Minnie's and Quinn's lives take very different courses. Discuss the ways the moments before and after they were born go on to dictate their lives.

3.

What role do Minnie's and Quinn's parents play in both the past and present of the story? How do past grudges become reconciled?

4.

Aside from meeting Quinn, Minnie's life undergoes a lot of change in the romance, career, and friendship departments. What are the main conflicts in each of these aspects of her life? How do they help Minnie redefine herself and ultimately bring her life back to order?

5.

Discuss how Minnie's relationship with Quinn differs from her relationship with Greg. Similarly, how did Quinn's previous relationships foster his commitment issues, and how does Minnie help him work through them?

6.

How do the meetings at Hampstead Heath help cultivate Minnie and Quinn's love? How do they become turning points in their relationship? Discuss the meaning of this place for them both, and the power of place in general in bringing people together.

7.

What can Minnie and Quinn's coming together tell us about fate and destiny when it comes to love? To what extent do we have to also shape that future ourselves?

8.

What do you think is in the future for Minnie and Quinn? How do you suspect their outlook on New Year's changes when they get together?

9.

Where do you want to be this time next year?

A Conversation with

Sophie Cousens

What inspired *This Time Next Year*?

I have always been interested in the idea of first impressions not being what they seem. Often, we meet people and think “They’re so lucky—their life looks so perfect,” but when we scratch the surface, it probably isn’t the case. With Quinn and Minnie, their lives look very different from the outset; he’s born with every advantage, whereas her family has always struggled. I wanted to explore this idea of being “born lucky”; how much of your life is predestined and how much of it is up to you.

Some inspiration for *This Time Next Year* came from highly structured novels I adore such as *One Day*, *Miss You*, or *Versions of Us*. I wanted to try writing something where the timeline and structure is a central part of how the story unfolds. The novel is set in 2020 but interspersed with flashbacks to New Year’s Eves of the past. I liked the idea that these earlier moments in the characters’ lives would help explain their behaviour in the present. We are all affected by our previous experiences, and I hoped this would be a neat way to illustrate these connections.

Quinn and Minnie are brought together repeatedly by serendipity and chance encounters. Were these moments fun to write? Did any of their run-ins surprise you as you were writing them?

I’m a big fan of romantic comedies, and have watched and read a lot of them. Writing this, I really enjoyed taking a few of the traditional rom-com tropes and having a little fun with them. So rather than having the hero and heroine have a chance encounter through a shared love of something romantic like French cookery, I have them share a love of a flea-ridden stray dog. Instead of having them meet on a moonlit night, where their eyes connect across a crowded room, they meet because she got locked in a bathroom all night and he’s the only one left at the party to let her out. I loved playing with convention and imagining fate to have a sense of humor.

I didn’t plan the book entirely when I started, and some things evolved organically as I wrote. For example, one of Minnie and Quinn’s meeting places is the pond on Hampstead Heath, where you can go wild swimming. As soon as I put the characters in this place, it felt special; a beautiful, natural environment, where all the trappings of their lives in the city fell away. It felt like common ground, where they could both be themselves, and I love that this location sort of pushed itself to the forefront in the story as I was writing.

“I loved playing with convention and imagining fate to have a sense of humour.”

How much influence does luck have in changing a person's life? Are there any times you've felt particularly lucky or unlucky?

I think luck can significantly affect your life—some people are given opportunities or advantages that others could only ever dream of. However, I think the degree to which this “luck” has a positive effect often comes down to attitude and outlook. Humans get used to a new normal pretty quickly, so if you win the lottery, you won't wake up every morning for the rest of your life thinking “I'm so lucky!” you'll probably just get used to your new life and find other things to complain about. I think the happiest, healthiest people I know look for the luck around them—“Aren't I lucky my kids are healthy”, “Aren't I lucky I have good friends”, “Aren't I lucky I get to eat oranges grown thousands of miles away for my breakfast!” Perspective is everything.

The feeling of being lucky or unlucky can often come from comparing yourself to others; I feel lucky in so many ways: lucky to work in a creative field, lucky to have a loving family and lucky to live by the sea. I try not to compare myself negatively to others, but it is so culturally ingrained, especially in the age of social media. I need to accept there will always be someone with a nicer house than me; someone with a better figure; someone who is cleverer, richer, funnier, and selling more books than me!

Why did you choose to center the novel around New Year's Eve? What makes New Year's special from other holiday romances?

At the beginning of the book, Quinn loves New Year's and Minnie hates it. Personally, I have a love-hate relationship with this day of the year, so I know where both of these characters are coming from. If you're happy with where you are in life and who you're with, it can be a wonderful night—a chance to celebrate, to make resolutions, to take a moment

to be grateful for the year that has passed and look forward to what the new year might bring. However, if you aren't where you want to be, or if you're single and you don't want to be, New Year's Eve can be hell, especially when you are at a party with no one special to kiss at midnight!

I think New Year's is the perfect setting for a romance, because it offers such a great opportunity for introspection, plus drinking champagne and kissing at midnight! Though 2020 is unlikely to go down in history as many people's favorite year; perhaps it's even more reason to reflect at the end of the year on our hopes for 2021. Obviously, some things we might have no influence over, but others we do, and there's no harm in taking a moment to articulate our hopes and dreams and recalibrate what is important.

Set against the backdrop of London, *This Time Next Year* explores the sights and sounds of the city. How does London bring the two characters together? What aspects of their love story are distinctly British?

The book is set all over London, but especially around Primrose Hill. It's where I lived when I first moved to the city, renting a tiny bedsit overlooking these beautiful brightly-coloured mansions. I imagined these mansions must be the perfect homes, that the people who lived in them must have the perfect lives. That preconception is a big part of what *This Time Next Year* is about. I think London, like a lot of cities, has smart, expensive areas and then you cross a road and suddenly it's a bit grimy. That's the texture that makes a city interesting, but it also means you have people from very different backgrounds living right next door to one another. Like any major city, London offers a wealth of excitement and opportunity, but if you are struggling financially, as Minnie is, it can also be a difficult place to be.

London definitely plays a part in bringing Minnie and Quinn together; it is only some-

where like London where two such different people could keep running into each other. I hope readers will get a real sense of place as the story weaves through London Zoo, Hampstead Heath, a race across town on a London bus, and fireworks over Primrose Hill. As well as the setting, there are definitely some distinct “British-isms” peppered throughout the book: Minnie’s parents are always keen for a cup of tea, they love *The Great British Bake Off*, and perhaps the sense of humour within these pages is also quite distinctly British.

***This Time Next Year* is as much a tribute to the importance of female friendship as it is a love story. What friendships in your own life inspired your writing?**

There’s a line in the book where Minnie sees two older women who are still best friends and she thinks to herself, “Maybe this was the love that truly endured.” This feels like one of the central tenets of the story for me. My best friends in the world are my school friends whom I have known since I was twelve. We have been there for one another through break-ups, weddings, fertility issues, children, and divorces, and I know we will be there for each other for all that lies ahead. I think there is something pure about the love and support of good friends—it is not tinted by sexual attraction or as tumultuous as romantic love can be. Sometimes my friends and I joke that if we outlive our partners, we will all go and live on a commune together in our eighties—I love that idea.

I think that the modern romantic fiction reader doesn’t necessarily want to see a heroine being “rescued” by a man, or feel that “finding a guy” fixes the heroine’s life somehow. What I love about this story is that it is friendship and developing a sense of self-worth that ultimately turn Minnie’s life around.

You’ve had a fascinating and successful career in TV production

***your time at shows like The Graham Norton Show and Russell Howard’s Good News* shape your sense of humor?**

Working in comedy entertainment, I had the good fortune to work with some incredibly funny people. It made going to work every day a joy, as there was always so much laughter in the room. Though I enjoyed working with all of them, I would say I don’t necessarily have the same sense of humor as some of the comics I worked with; my humour is probably sillier and more whimsical. When I was working on Russell’s show I became conditioned to look for sexual innuendo everywhere, but thankfully I think that instinct has left me now. Ha!

As a producer I learned that some things in comedy can’t be taught; Graham Norton has an incredibly quick wit, Ruth Jones a genuine warmth and instinct for story—I think these are things you either have or you don’t. I also learned just how hard comics work; you might be funny, but that doesn’t mean you can just turn up on show day and wing it. These comics are highly professional: they research their guests, they craft their jokes; many are perfectionists. I think working with people who are top of their game showed me that having an idea isn’t enough—you have to put the time in to make your work as good as it can be.

What’s next for you?

I am working on a new book, as I have just signed a second book deal with Penguin Random House. I quit my day job during lockdown, so am now working as a full-time writer, and I feel incredibly lucky that this is what I get to do everyday. I always wanted to write, so to be allowed to do it as a job feels like an incredible luxury. I have so many ideas queuing up to be written, but this next one I’m especially excited about—it’s another romantic comedy with a very different heroine to Minnie, but I’m not sure how much more I can say about it at this stage!

Recipe

Steak Gyllenhaal Pie (Steak and Ale)

For the filling

1 lb, 4oz boneless beef shank or beef chuck, cut into large chunks
3 tablespoons all-purpose flour
3 tablespoons sunflower oil
6 slices bacon, cut into ¼-inch pieces
2 onions, peeled and quartered
1¼ cups (300ml) Guinness or similar dark ale
¾ cup (200ml) beef stock
4 thyme sprigs
2 bay leaves
2 carrots, peeled and roughly chopped
2 celery stalks, roughly chopped
6 ounces Portobello mushrooms
½ teaspoon packed light brown sugar
1 teaspoon balsamic vinegar
Kosher salt and freshly ground pepper to taste

For the pastry

(Or you can cheat and use shop-bought, ready-to-roll pastry! I won't tell anyone.)

3 ½ cups all-purpose flour
1 stick (8 tablespoons) cold, unsalted butter, diced
½ cup lard (or substitute with more butter)
Large pinch of salt
2 or 3 tablespoons ice cold water
A little beaten egg to use for glazing (alternatively you can use milk)

Tools needed

You will need time. This is not a quick meal to make. Alternatively, you can make a big batch of filling then freeze and defrost in portions when you want to make your pies.

A large casserole dish

4 to 6 individual pie dishes or 1 large (3-pint) pie dish

A pie funnel, if you have one (you can also use an ovenproof upturned egg cup, to stop the pastry from falling into the pie. You will only need this if making a large pie rather than individual portions.)

A great soundtrack to sing along to as you cook!

Serves 4 to 6

I don't think I've ever smelt a pie this good.

—Quinn



Steak Gyllenhaal Pie (continued)

Make the filling

Preheat the oven to 300F (150C). Put the chunks of steak in a resealable plastic bag with the flour and toss until well coated. Heat a splash of the oil in a large frying pan over a high heat and sear the flour-coated beef in batches for 3 to 4 minutes, turning to brown all sides. Spoon the seared beef into an ovenproof casserole dish.

Add a splash more oil to the empty pan, and return to a high heat. Fry the bacon until it begins to brown. Next, cook the onions in the same pan for 5 to 6 minutes, until soft and opaque. Drain off any excess bacon fat and add the onion/bacon mixture to the casserole dish.

Pour about a third of the ale into the pan and bring to a simmer for two minutes to deglaze the pan, then pour the whole lot into the casserole dish with the meat. Place the dish on the stove and add the remaining ale, stock, herbs, carrots, celery, mushrooms, sugar, and vinegar. If the liquid doesn't cover the ingredients, add a little more ale or stock. Bring to a boil on the stove, so that the mixture is piping-hot when it goes in the oven.

Cover with foil, or put the lid on the casserole dish, and put in the oven for 2½ hours. Remove from the oven to stir, taste the sauce, and season with salt and pepper. Then return to the oven uncovered, stirring occasionally, for another hour, until the meat is tender. Cool to room temperature.

Meanwhile, make the pastry: Sift the flour into a large bowl, add the diced butter and lard and rub in with your fingertips until the mixture resembles coarse breadcrumbs, with pea-sized lumps of fat. Alternatively you can use a food processor and pulse the ingredients until the mixture resembles breadcrumbs.

Stir in a pinch of salt, then gradually add the ice-cold water, 1 tablespoon at a time, just enough for the dough to come together. Your pastry should still be somewhat crumbly when ready. Don't add too much water, or it will make the crust tough.

Knead the dough briefly and gently on a floured surface and pat into discs. Wrap the discs in plastic wrap and chill for 20 minutes.

Assemble the pie: Preheat the oven to 350F (180C). Spoon the filling into a dish. Roll out the pastry on a floured surface to slightly less than ½ inch thick. Place over the pie, pushing down around the edges to seal, then, using a knife, cut an inch-long slit in the middle to allow steam out. If you have one, place a pie funnel on the center of the dough to keep the pastry crispy. Use any extra pastry to decorate the top—I like to add a small *M* to mine! Brush the surface with with the beaten egg. Place in the middle of the oven and bake for 30 minutes, or until golden.

Share the pie with someone you love. Or why not make four small ones—keep two and deliver two as gifts to someone who might like a home-cooked meal!

Recipes

Minnie's Amazing Fruit Cake

Juice of half an orange (about 2 tablespoons)
Zest of 1 orange
2 tablespoons brandy (optional)
2¼ cups mixed fruit (combination of raisins, currants,
and maraschino cherries—any dried fruit you like!)
1½ sticks unsalted butter, softened, plus more for greasing the pan
1 cup self-rising flour
½ stick (2oz) soft margarine
1 cup packed light brown sugar
4 large free-range eggs, room-temperature
½ cup ground almonds
1 teaspoon cinnamon
1 teaspoon pumpkin pie spice
1 cup chopped almonds (optional)

Serves 12

Combine the orange juice, orange zest, and brandy, if using, in a mixing bowl. Add the dried fruit and soak overnight with a cover on top.

Line the bottom of an 8-inch round cake pan with parchment paper, cut to fit, and lightly butter the bottom of the paper to make it stick, then butter and flour the sides of the cake pan. Preheat the oven to 320F (160C).

In a large bowl, beat the butter, margarine, and sugar with an electric mixer at high speed until light and fluffy. Add the eggs one at a time and beat after each addition until well combined.

Sift together the flour, ground almonds, cinnamon, and pumpkin pie spice. Add the flour mixture to the bowl and fold in until just combined. Add the soaked fruit and chopped almonds (if you are including them).

Pour the mixture into the prepared cake pan. Bake for 1 hour and 15 minutes, and test with a toothpick or skewer. When it comes out clean, the cake is done. If not, return to the oven for 10 minutes and repeat. You may need to bake for up to 1 hour and 45 minutes, depending on your oven. If the top starts to burn before the middle is done, you can loosely cover with foil in the oven.

Enjoy with family or friends, sharing your dreams and ambitions for the year ahead. Where would you like to be eating fruit cake this time next year?

*I put extra cherries
in, just the
way you like it.
—Minnie*

New Year's Sparkler Cocktail

1 ounce berry-flavored vodka
1 ½ ounces pomegranate juice
3 ½ ounces Champagne
Garnish: skewered raspberries

Serves 1

Add the vodka and pomegranate juice to a chilled Champagne flute.

Top with Champagne and garnish with raspberries on a long skewer.

Recipe credit: Liquor.com
(liquor.com/recipes/new-years-sparkler)